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XIV.—A NEGLECTED PASSAGE ON THE THREE UNITIES OF THE FRENCH CLASSIC DRAMA.

The need for critical research in at least one field of modern literature is exemplified by the lack of exact information regarding the establishment on the French stage of the three dramatic unities that characterized so markedly many pieces of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although our knowledge of the history of these unities has been increased by several works that have recently appeared, a number of facts concerning them remain to be determined, as Dannheisser, the chief authority on the subject, has clearly shown.¹ Thus, while demonstrating that these unities of action, time, and place were not imposed at one time, but, developing separately, came only after a half century into general acceptance and a rigorously narrow form, he has left unfixed the date at which they were first singled out in seventeenth century France as the distinguishing marks of the classic drama.

According to Dannheisser, the first French writer of the seventeenth century to make reference to these unities was the physician, Isnard, in his preface (published April 30, 1631) to the *Fillis de Scire*, a posthumous play by his friend, Pichou. That this is the earliest seventeenth century reference to the three unities is apparently believed by Rigal² and by Morf³ in their treatment of the subject. It is my purpose to show that this belief is ill-founded, for, before Isnard

¹ In his admirable treatise *Zur Geschichte der Einheiten in Frankreich*, *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Litteratur*, 1892, xiv, 1-76.

² Cf. Petit de Julleville's *Histoire de la Langue et de la Littérature française*, iv, 241.

³ Cf. Herrig's *Archiv*, 1905, cxv, 433.

wrote, the unities were distinctly discussed by Antoine Mareschal, who was no mere theorizer, but an active dramatist, a declared opponent of the unities that he named.

Le sieur Mareschal, a contemporary of Corneille and Rotrou, is known to us only through his nine extant dramas. His works have been noted by de Beauchamps,¹ the Frères Parfaict,² and La Vallière.³ One of them, *Le Railleur*, was reprinted by Édouard Fournier in *Le Théâtre français au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle*⁴ with a brief prefatory statement concerning the author.

Fournier judges Mareschal to have possessed "de l'esprit, de la littérature, du monde, une certaine indépendance d'idées, qui le poussait aux originalités de sujet et de style et qui l'engageait dans des voies vraiment nouvelles." He believes, though he has no conclusive proof of it, that Mareschal was probably attached to the household of some nobleman, in spite of the title *avocat* applied to him in his *Inconstance d'Hylas*. The poet's versatility is shown by the wide range of subject and *genre* covered by his plays. His *Inconstance d'Hylas* (1630-1635) is one of the many pastoral dramas drawn from the romance of *Astrée*. *La Sœur Valeureuse* (1634) is an exceedingly *romanesque* tragedy-comedy, extravagantly praised in introductory verses by Mairet, Du Ryer, Scudéry, Rotrou, and Corneille. *Le Railleur* (1636 or 1637) is a comedy of intrigue; *Le Véritable Capitan* (1637 or 1639) a translation of Plautus's *Miles gloriosus*. *La Cour Bergere* (1639) is a tragedy-comedy of especial interest to an English reader, for it is based on Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and is dedicated to "Robert

¹ *Recherches sur les Theatres de France*, II, 106, Paris, 1735.

² *Histoire du Theatre françois*, IV, 497-8, Paris, 1745.

³ *Bibliothèque du Theatre françois*, II, 64 seq., Dresden, 1768.

⁴ Pages 349-372.

Sidney, Comte de Leycestre, Ambassadeur en France." *Le Mausolée* (1639–1641), tragi-comedy, and *Papyre* (1646), tragedy, are dramatizations of ancient history. *Le jugement équitable de Charles le Hardy* (1645),¹ tragedy, draws its plot from what was then modern history, an unusual proceeding in seventeenth century France.

But Mareschal's play with which we are at present concerned is *La Genereuse Allemande ou le Triomphe d'Amour*, a romantic tragi-comedy written in two *journées*, according to an occasional usage of the time.² The privilege to print this work was given to Pierre Rocolet at Lyons, September 1, 1630. The *achevé d'imprimer* for the first *journée* is dated January 10, 1631; that for the second, November 18, 1630,³ so that the second *journée* preceded the first by nearly two months. Now it is to this second *journée* that a preface is attached, giving at some length the dramatic principles of the author and containing the passage describing the three unities. The document was certainly written before November 18, 1630, probably before September 1 of that year, thus preceding Isnard's preface by from five to eight months.

The passage in which Mareschal mentions the three unities and declares his hostility to them runs as follows:

"... n'ay pas voulu me retraindre à ces estroites bornes ni du lieu, ni du temps, ni de l'action; qui sont les trois poincts principaux que regardent les regles des Anciens.

¹ The dates given indicate the first known appearance of the plays, when they were acted, privileged, or printed, as the case may be.

² Cf. Du Ryer's *Argenis et Poliarque* (1630 and 1631) and Schelandre's *Tyr et Sidon* (1628).

³ For a careful investigation of these dates I am indebted to the kindness and scholarship of Mr. W. A. Stowell, Fellow in the Romance Department of the Johns Hopkins University.

Qu'ils me soutiennent que le suiét de Theatre doit estre un en l'action, c'est à dire estre simple en son euenement, et ne receuoir d'incidents qui ne tendent tous à un seul effect d'une personne seule; ie leur declareray que le mien en a deux diuerses. Qu'ils soutiennent encore que la Scene ne connoist qu'un lieu, et que pour faire quelque rapport du spectacle aux spectateurs qui ne remuënt point, elle n'en peut sortir qu'en mesme temps elle ne sorte aussi de la raison; i'auou'ray que la mienne du commencement et pendant les deux premiers Actes est en la Ville de Prague, et presque tout le reste en celle d'Aule, en un mot qu'elle passe de Boheme en Sylesie. De plus qu'ils iurent qu'un suiét, pour estre iuste ne doit contenir d'actions qui s'étendent au delà d'un iour, et qui ne puissent auoir esté faites entre deux Soleils; ie ne suis pas pour cela prest à croire que celles que i'ay décrites, et qui sont veritables, pour auoir franchy ces limites ayent plus mauuaise grace."

To appreciate the importance of this passage it is necessary to consider the previous history of the rules in France. During the sixteenth century the unity of action was occasionally implied, the unity of place was mentioned once or twice, the unity of time was discussed with some frequency. All three unities may be deduced from Scaliger's *Poetices* (1561), though they are not presented together and though Scaliger requires the unity of place only as a means of facilitating the observation of the unity of time. Jean de la Taille declares in his *Art de la Tragedie* (1572) that, "il faut tousiours représenter l'histoire, ou le ieu en vn mesme iour, en vn mesme temps, et en vn mesme lieu." In his second preface to the *Franciade* Ronsard states that tragedy and comedy are limited to "peu d'espace, c'est à dire d'un iour entier." Rivaudeau in the preface to his *Aman* (1564) holds that the time represented should not exceed the actual

time required by the performance.¹ Jean de Beaubreuil (1582) speaks of "la règle superstitieuse des unités."² Laudun d'Aigaliers³ opposes the twenty-four hour rule, while Vauquelin de la Fresnaye⁴ upholds it. But these theorists do not form the views held by seventeenth century dramatists with regard to the unities. They influence only the academic tragedies of the sixteenth century, a type of play that ceases to be written during the first quarter of the following century, giving way before the practical and irregular drama of Hardy and his contemporaries. When Frenchmen are again attracted to classic play-writing, they turn for their rules to the Italians,⁵ to Aristotle, and to the example of the ancient tragedies themselves, rather than to the plays and theories of their sixteenth century compatriots. Such critics as Morf and Dannheisser are therefore correct in beginning the history of the French dramatic unities with the rebirth of the classic tragedy and its first appearance in France as a popular dramatic form, in the generation of Richelieu, Chapelain, and Corneille. Turning to this period of literary history, we become acquainted with the following facts.

As early as 1620 Chapelain mentioned the unity of action, but only as a general principle adhered to in the construction of any poem to distinguish it from a piece of prose fiction. "Or l'unité de l'action, entre les règles générales que toute

¹ Cf. Morf, *Geschichte der neuern französischen Litteratur*, pp. 206-207, Strasburg, 1898.

² Cf. *ibidem*, p. 207.

³ Cf. Arnaud, *Théories dramatiques*, p. 334, Paris, 1888.

⁴ See *L'Art poétique de Vauquelin de la Fresnaye*, Paris, 1885.

⁵ Especially to Castelvetro, to whom the first promulgation of the law of three unities is commonly ascribed. Even he, though dilating upon the unities, does not speak of them as the three essential rules of the classic drama, as does Mareschal. See *La Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata et sposta*, pp. 109, 173, and 534 in the edition of Bale, 1576.

épopée doit observer, est particulièrement la principale, sans laquelle le poème n'est pas poème, ains roman."¹ Mairret appears to know this rule when he writes his *Silvanire* (1629), though he does not mention it until two years later.

Before Mareschal, indeed, the writings concerned with dramatic unities were largely devoted to the unity of time, which, taken from Aristotle as interpreted by Renaissance scholars, had been familiar to Italian critics of the sixteenth century. Thus Chapelain referred to "un an, terme que se sont prudemment prescrit tous ceux qui avec honneur ont voulu traiter d'action illustre en poésie narrative, comme celui d'un jour naturel, ceux qui ont embrassé la représentative."² On September 28, 1628, Balzac wrote to Mme Desloges concerning a *précieuse* who "n'a point assez de patience pour souffrir une comédie qui n'est pas dans la loi des 24 heures, qu'elle s'en va faire publier par toute la France."³ The same year Ogier opposed this rule in his preface to Schelandre's *Tyr et Sidon*, while in 1629 Mairret intentionally observed it in his *Silvanire*. Other references to the unity of time, such as those made by Isnard, Mairret, and Scudéry, are subsequent to the citation I have made from Mareschal.

It now becomes clear that Mareschal is the first French author of the seventeenth century known to mention the unity of place, and the first to speak of the unity of action as belonging especially to the drama rather than applying to all poetic forms. Of greater importance is the fact that he is the first French author known to group these unities of action, time, and place so as to point them out as the three essential rules of the classic theater. Whether he was

¹ Cf. E. Bovet, *La Préface de Chapelain à l'Adonis*, page 42, in the *Festschrift Heinrich Morf*, Halle, 1905.

² *Ibidem*, page 46.

³ See Dannheisser, *Zur Geschichte der Einheiten*, page 71.

actually the first may well be doubted, for the fact that he opposes these three rules implies that they had been previously upheld. Such an advocate of the unities may or may not have written in French, but until he is discovered, the priority in this matter of French dramatic history clearly belongs to Mareschal.

But the passage cited from Mareschal is of interest, not only in showing its author's position among writers on the unities, but also by the light it throws upon the manner in which these unities were understood in 1630. Mareschal's conception of the unity of action is much the same as that which Mairret expresses in the *Préface* (1631) to his *Silvanire* by the phrase, "maistresse et principale action à laquelle toutes les autres se rapportent comme les lignes de la circonference au centre." Of greater importance is Mareschal's understanding of the unity of place, for he shows clearly that those who prescribed the observance of that unity did so, not because it was a natural consequence of the observance of the unity of time, as Corneille held later,¹ but because by logical realism the location of the actors should coincide with that of the spectators "qui ne remuent point." The unity of place, therefore, as Dannheisser remarks, was first observed in consequence of the author's objection to a change of scene, due to his desire to conform with the necessarily fixed position of the audience.

It is difficult to determine whether Mareschal held that the classic rule reduced the scene represented in a play to the actual space occupied by the stage, or whether he believed that it allowed the inclusion of some locality, limited in extent, though larger than the stage; as, for example, a town, provided the action did not go beyond its walls. This

¹ Cf. Dannheisser, who, in *Zur Geschichte der Einheiten*, page 57, points out Corneille's error without acquaintance with Mareschal.

larger view of the unity of place, the one which Corneille presents in the *Cid*, is probably that referred to by Mareschal, for he states that his play violates this unity of place by reason of the fact that its action occurs in *two* towns, situated in different provinces. It is probable that what Dannheisser calls *Zimmereinheit*, subsequently established on the classic French stage, was as yet unknown, for Isnard in 1631 explains the observance of the unity of place by writing, "si l'on veut représenter une effusion de sang dans Constantinople, qu'on ne doit rien exécuter de cette entreprise ailleurs."¹

According to Mareschal the unity of time is observed when the action takes place "entre deux Soleils," an ambiguous phrase explained by Chapelain as follows: "L'action se termine entre deux Soleils, c'est à dire, vn peu plus ou vn peu moins que la moitié des vingt quatre heures."² If this is also Mareschal's meaning, his reduction of the unity of time to a period of twelve hours instead of twenty-four coincides with the view held previously by Castelvetro and subsequently by d'Aubignac.³

Mareschal's statement regarding the unities shows further that Corneille was mistaken in declaring that the only rule known in 1630 was that which limited the time of the action to twenty-four hours.⁴ It shows, too, that Dannheisser is incorrect in referring to Scudéry's *Ligdamon et Lidias* as "der erste Protest gegen die alleinseligmachenden Theorien der Regeldichter."⁵ As Mareschal's mention of the unities precedes this *Protest* by a year, Scudéry cannot be considered their first opponent.

In conclusion I cite two documents of this period which

¹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 75.

² Cf. Arnaud, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

³ See *ibidem*, p. 240, and Castelvetro, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁴ See his *Examen to Clitandre*.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

express briefly the opinions of Mareschal and have been entirely neglected by dramatic critics. Le sieur de Richemont Banchereau writes in the *Advertissement au Lecteur* before his *Passions esgarees*, a tragi-comedy published in 1632, "Au reste, ne t'arreste pas tant aux regles de la Tragicomedie en lisant celle-cy, ny aux loix du theatre François: Telle contrainte, qui n'est que bien-seante aux mercenaires, me sieroit assez mal, à cause que ie la hays." At greater length the anonymous author of *Les Trophees de la Fidelité*,¹ declares in his preface *aux bons esprits* that he has not observed certain rules "parce que ie les ignore, et ne les veus pas sçauoir. Je parle de celles qui ne sont point necessaires à la Poësie, et qu'une nouvelle cabale d'esprits trop reguliers, de la glose desquels on m'a voulu faire peur, a osé donner pour des loix prononcées de la bouche même des Muses. C'est une espee de chiquane dans cet Art, où la clarté du discours, la fluidité de la veine, et la propriété des termes, apres la mesure, sont les parties les plus requises par moy. Je n'ay suiui que l'impetuosité de mon Genie. . . ."

These passages, taken in connection with the earlier and more important citation made from Mareschal, show by their outspoken opposition to classic rules that, at the beginning of the fourth decade of the seventeenth century, the three unities had become sufficiently strong in France to elicit the explanations of their opponents, even when they were unable to overcome the expression of their hostility.

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¹ Published at Lyon, 1632.